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Photography: Lyndsie Bourgon

Matador makeover

BY LYNDSIE BOURGON February 17, 2011 14:02

“What a crazy space, right?” says Dylan Guest, lead carpenter for WellSpace, the business that will live inside the old, iconic Matador nightclub building on Dovercourt, north of College.

Owner Paul McCaughey (pictured at right) and Guest are standing inside the former after-hours venue, necks craned at the panels of wood that line the back of the hall. The panels are covered in signatures from the musicians that played there The Matador since its opening in 1964—Leonard Cohen, Blue Rodeo and Randy Bachman, among them.



Three years ago, the building escaped sudden demolition after protesters stopped the city from turning it into a parking lot. (Fittingly, Joni Mitchell’s name is on that wall, a curly memento of some long night spent there—they almost did [pave paradise](#), it seems.) However, just as The Matador escaped this unceremonious fate, Ann Dunn—whose family

had owned the building since 1962—[announced the bar would be closing for good](#), citing fatigue.



McCaughey, who owns the [Rising Sun School of Tai Chi](#) at Bathurst and Barton, bought the building from the Dunn family in March 2010, with the intent of transforming it into a broadly defined wellness space (hence the name).

His plans for the space are certainly ambitious. The building itself is mammoth—at every turn there is another room, another space that could be renovated. There are apartments upstairs and rooms in the basement. There’s even a rooftop patio. There will also be a mid-size restaurant (serving brunch and local, organic meals) at the front of the building. The huge ballroom space will be rented out for events like weddings, art shows, film screenings and dance classes or as a practice space. The downstairs will be used for dance and other movement classes. There will also be private catering facilities for event planners behind the ballroom.



Though the space is being gutted, McCaughey is aware of the historical background that makes the building such a landmark. He'll be keeping the Matador sign hanging outside the building, as well as incorporating some of the art, signed wall panels and old furniture within the restaurant.

"There are times where you get to go on a great expedition," says McCaughey of his decision to buy the space. "It becomes a life-changing experience. This is one of those times. It's a chance to do something really special."



For local music lovers, however, the transformation is a bittersweet one.

"This is a great city, it's organic and fast-moving," says [Colm Hogan](#), a filmmaker working on a documentary about Toronto's after-hours club scene. "But we don't hold onto our past. So many clubs become parking lots or condominiums."

Hogan echoes a sentiment what we must all be feeling—that it's somewhat ironic for a venue once synonymous with debauchery and late-night liver damage to become a business focused on holistic wellness.

"It's a sign of the times," he says, adding that the transformation into Wellspace really is a best-case scenario for the building. "Nine times out of 10, places like these get sold off to corporations like Shoppers Drug Mart or Starbucks. The worst is when they become parking lots, because there's no trace of it."

The Matador has always inspired debate within the community. A public hearing about the future of the building in 2007 pitted those that loved the bar against many nearby business owners who complained about broken beer bottles and vandalism. Through Wellspace, it seems a compromise has been achieved.

"I think [the community is] relieved we're not going to be a club," says McCaughey.

Andrew Ois, owner of the Sunshine Organic Market around the corner, says he's happy that there won't be "a bunch of drunks in the parking lot... The Matador's days have passed."

"Paul comes in and eats here all the time," adds Eric Hadley, owner of [Hadley's](#), the relatively new restaurant right next door to The Matador. "I'm happy that he's doing something with the building, and it'll help our business too."

McCaughey hopes to have Wellspace up and running for a New Year's Eve party this December, but it won't be easy.

"It's not a house renovation, I'm essentially renovating a city block," he says. "The good thing is that I have solid support and financing, and it's going to happen."

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